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PROTOTYPE FOR NEW ARMY RIFLE DEBUTS IN EUROPE AT LAND COMBAT EXPO AND GRAFENWOEHR FIRING RANGES

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HEIDELBERG, Germany — In some ways, the U.S. Army Europe Land Combat Expo 04 at the Patrick Henry Village here last week could have been called the “Gee Whiz Expo,” for the seemingly endless number of displays where almost everything the Army has to offer now and in the future was unveiled.

One booth that drew large crowds showcased the front-running prototype rifle slated to replace the Army’s venerable M16 and M4 rifles – the XM8 Modular Assault Weapon System from Alliant Techsystems/Heckler and Koch. The design, based largely on Soldier feedback, aims to give the transforming Army the versatility and durability it needs in the future. It has been in development since 2002, and is expected to be ready for fielding next year.



SPC KRISTOPHER JOSEPH
Pfc. David McCoy from V Corps' 1st Armored Division checks out the XM8 assault weapon at the U.S. Army Europe Land Combat Expo at Patrick Henry Village in Heidelberg, Germany September 29. The XM8 prototype is currently being tested by the Army as a possible replacement for the M16 and M4 rifles the Army currently uses.

The hallmark of the rifle is its modular design. Using interchangeable parts, the XM8 can be transformed into four different variants intended to taken on any mission requirement in any environment.

"This weapon fits for any commander's mission," said Lt. Col. Kevin Stoddard, product manager for PM Soldiers Weapons of Ft. Belvoir, Virginia. "Soldiers more and more are being asked to perform a variety of tasks, and the current weapon systems limit the options for commanders to get their units at their highest combat effectiveness."

One example would be convoy operations, where a commander might want drivers to have a compact weapon, passengers to have standard-sized weapons, and a gunner to have a long-range or more lethal weapon, said Stoddard. With the XM8, every Soldier would have all of these variants at his fingertips, and commanders would not need to know who is qualified on what weapon to properly place them in the convoy.

Stoddard listed some of the advantages he says the XM8 has over the M16 or M4. The new rifle boasts a built-in changeable sighting system; different barrel lengths; an almost impervious magazine that Stoddard demonstrated by trampling for Expo crowds; a 15-20,000-round barrel life; semi- or fully automatic operation, and a 30 percent weight reduction versus the M16. The 5.56mm rifle can also be fitted with an integral 40mm grenade launcher. And it costs one-third less than the M-16, Stoddard adds.

Stoddard claimed that Soldiers who have tested the model were able to hit point targets as far as 600 -700 meters away, outdistancing current weapon systems by nearly 400 meters.

"Soldier feedback is one of our highest priorities for this weapon," said Stoddard.

"With so many troops these days experiencing real-life missions, we really have a pulse on what they want and what they need in a weapon to be more combat effective."



CHUCK GORDON

Spc. Angelica Rodriguez of V Corps' 3rd Battalion, 58th Aviation fires the XM8 prototype combat rifle at the Grafenwoehr (Germany) Training Area Sept. 30. Rodriguez, currently a student at the NCO Academy in Grafenwoehr, was one of several Soldiers to test-fire the prototype combat rifle system.

The XM8 has already been tested in many stateside units, and at the same time visitors to the Land Combat Expo were looking it over in Heidelberg, it was making its testing debut in Europe.

Heckler and Koch technicians and

program managers from the Army's Soldier Weapons Project wanted to get comments on the prototype from troops here, so they brought a few of the weapons to the Grafenwoehr (Germany) Training Area September 30, where about 60 V Corps and USAREUR Soldiers attending NCO academy courses had a chance to test-fire the XM8.

Soldiers got to fire three configurations of the weapon: a compact model with collapsible stock similar to the Army's current M-4; a slightly more robust model that falls into the carbine range, and a longer-barreled version more like the M-16A1.

Spc. Angelica Rodriguez of V Corps' 3rd Battalion 58th Aviation in Wiesbaden, Germany, was one of the lucky XM8 test-firers, and she was impressed.

"It is really beautiful," Rodriguez said. "Nice. I really like the butt stock; it was adjustable, which is great for the female Soldier, because our arms are shorter. It was light, easy to handle, and you can do everything with one hand. It's pretty awesome."

